'Artist' unmatched for making chess fun

'The Chess Artist: Genius, Obsession and the World's Oldest Game'
J.C. Hallman
(Thomas Dunne Books, $25.95)

By John MacCormack
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Start with two footloose Atlantic City casino dealers, one a wicked writer, the other a reclusive chess master, and assign them to write a tell-all book about the history of chess.

For research, send them on a meandering transcontinental chess pilgrimage with stops and games at an American prison ward; a Princeton University tea; a decaying chess club in St. Petersburg, Russia; and finally, Kalmykia, a small semi-autonomous Russian republic.

Not surprisingly, the resultant book, *The Chess Artist* is a chess book like no other, irreverent, insightful and funny.

Take, for example, author J.C. Hallman's introduction of Paul Blatney, a highly ranked player about to face Glenn Umstead, the author's chess-playing sidekick, in the New York Open: "He was a nondescript man who fit the profile of a serial killer — short, well-groomed, quiet and very dangerous. His game with Glenn was highly complex, with few exchanges and a great deal of tension on the board. I rooted for Glenn to add to Blatney's complexity. I just wanted to see the little man flinch. But Blatney was cold and he eventually forced a hole in Glenn's kingside."

Or join them in New York City at a notorious chess lair where speed-playing hustlers wait by open-air boards to relieve chumps of their excess funds much to the chagrin of the law: "The chess corner of Washington Square Park was a bubble of lawlessness, a sphere where the addictive quality of chess aligned with the addictive quality of all the pharmaceuticals for sale in the same arena. The police occasionally made arrests but the chess corner was like a pet shop fish tank filled with guppies — every once in a while the net came down and snatched someone away, but after the slight turmoil everyone went about their business."

Then there is the bizarre stay in Kalmykia.

Hallman and Umstead traveled to Kalmykia to meet President Kirsan Iliumzhinov, who espoused chess as national religion, and to test a narrow theoretical hunch about the game's ancient history.

The stay in Kalmykia is spiced by Hallman's discrete inquiries into the murder of a local reporter who wrote critically of Iliumzhinov, and by local suspicions that the two Americans are spies.

Beyond all of its improbable, if fascinating, chess gonzo, *The Chess Artist* is a real chess book, with real history, real games and real players. Hallman, a player, writes as a cult insider. He takes a game long dominated by Russians and often seen as inscrutable and elitist by outsiders, and makes it human and comprehensible. He also grapples with the eternal questions: Is chess art, science or illness?